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## 5. THE INFERNAL AFFAIRS TRILOGY AND HONGKONG CINEMA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE EXTERNAL WORLD

Mark Houssart

### Abstract

*Infernal Affairs and its two sequels form a highly commercially and critically successful Chinese film franchise. Itself showing the stylistic and narrative influence of the Hollywood crime movie, the series went on to enjoy great cult popularity in the West and inspire American remake *The Departed*. This piece examines and discusses what the films themselves and the story of their creation and journey across the world imply about the implementation of foreign influence in Hong Kong cinema and the consumption of the subsequent product by those foreign nations. It takes in to account the process of the trilogy's production whilst making room for critical analysis of the films and an overview of the reception the films received. The piece seeks to draw conclusions about how the dichotomy between Hong Kong cinema and art from other cultures around the world has evolved and about what the future might hold for this relationship.*

### "The world is yours after '97:" Introduction

The Hong Kong film industry has long been a powerful and distinctive commercial and artistic entity unto itself. Catering to a culture and society vastly different to those which produce the mainstream films of the West, it has instead built a popular cinema rooted in its nation's own values, history and story-telling traditions, making films which have often been hugely successful with audiences in Hong Kong and mainland China. It is this very distinctiveness and inseparability from their cultural context which has prevented the vast majority of the resultant films from ever securing a large mainstream audience in Western countries, but a niche awareness has been in place for many years and has grown larger with each passing decade. The dramas of Zhang Yimou, the contemporary action movies of John Woo or the entire subgenre of historical *wuxia* adventures were treasured by film lovers and critics, and their influence showed, to different degrees, in American animation, the films of Ridley Scott and various Hollywood action films. While this influence has long been visible, viewers and many critics were for a long time only dimly aware of it, due to the poor distribution of Hong Kong films in the West and the lingering of outdated preconceptions regarding Eastern cinema.

If the gradual breaking down of barriers in international cinema through the advent of VHS in the 1990s did something to readdress this ignorance, the crucial evolutionary step towards greater viewer credibility came through its overwhelming growth as an influence on Hollywood film. The structural debt owed by Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* to Ringo Lam's *City on Fire* or the decision of the Wachowski brothers to employ revered martial arts choreographer Yuen Woo-Ping for groundbreaking blockbuster *The Matrix* signalled an admiration for Hong Kong cinema made even clearer when these film-makers openly discussed such influences. The latter in particular, happening as it did in close proximity to the Western release of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, did much to refute clichéd perceptions of chopsoy movies and alert audiences to the visceral excitement and technical skill visible in many Hong

Kong genre productions. This built to a slow change of the way Hong Kong cinema was perceived in the West, and the changing of that perception had the knock-on effect of also, gradually, changing the thought process behind Hong Kong productions. This is highly significant to a discussion of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy, indicating as it does that the films were produced in an industry changed beyond recognition by the previously unheard of possibility of international success and acclaim. *The Non-Stop Path*, to use a more literal translation of the film's Chinese title, gives in all its particulars the impression of having been conceived as a tentpole production. The presence of themes and plot points familiar from a cross-section of well-received Chinese productions and the use of an all-star cast indicate an awareness of potential domestic success on the part of the filmmakers. Such a success may in turn bring the film the opportunity to be seen by a broad audience in the West, and the film deploys the same self-awareness with regard to what this second audience is likely to want to see. The film thus operates within the cinematic vernacular of a pervasive Hollywood genre and for the most part favours a humanist approach over a more culturally specific one. The impression is certainly one of a pragmatically conceived and commercially sound venture, but the motives behind that design can only be competently judged after watching the evolutionary process that occurs over the course of the film and the sequels it eventually inspired.

*Infernal Affairs*, to be called that from now on so as to avoid confusion, is a crime thriller following two traitors: one is a Triad mole in the Hong Kong police, the other an undercover cop in the same Triad gang. When a botched sting informs both sides that there's a spy among them, the covert battle graduates to open warfare, with veteran cop Inspector Wong and Triad boss Sam each vowing to sniff out the imposter in their ranks. The thriller that is moulded from this scenario is geared to slow-burning tension, gaining much from the backdrop of a sleek, atmospheric Hong Kong. The plot development and character definition operates on the level of cipher and genre convention. Characters interact in the way most likely to heighten the emotional stakes for the two leads and illustrate the moral and personal quandaries of their situation. That the film takes place against a backdrop unfamiliar to most Western viewers is reflected in the action to some extent, but not allowed to drive it. The cultural background of the characters comes through in their driven and career-minded behaviour, but doesn't differentiate them irreconcilably from counterparts in Hollywood movies.

Links to successful Hong Kong films of the eighties notwithstanding, the foreign influence in *Infernal Affairs* is unmistakable. Its largely naturalistic style is closer to a Hollywood crime thriller than the films of Jet Li (the latter having been relatively successful outside of Hong Kong). The film would be much compared to Michael Mann's *Heat* when finally released in the West, and the influence of Mann's film is present both in the central notion of dual identity between a cop and a criminal and in the film's devotion to steadily building tension. If there is a single factor rooting the film unmistakably in its cultural context, it is probably the highly distinctive and considered fashion in which the city of Hong Kong is portrayed. The script

and cinematography create opportunities to show the city in numerous different lights, ranging from gorgeous expansive shots of the harbour (showcased wonderfully in Wong's rooftop meetings with his mole, Chan Wing-Yan) to the humid tension of the night-time scenes. This is neither the tourist Hong Kong nor the Hong Kong of seventies martial arts thrillers. It is a fast-moving, ruthlessly modern city with several overt and covert wars playing out on its soil. Conversely, even this determination to make the film's unusual setting as striking as possible goes even further to illuminating a deep kinship with the crime movies of the West. Just as *Bullit* and *The French Connection* caught San Francisco and New York in as immersive and evocative a way as possible, the makers of *Infernal Affairs* submit their own milieu for inclusion on the same crime movie map, intentionally or otherwise. The intriguing, well-mounted, lightly idiosyncratic genre film resulting from this unique mixture of ingredients is a striking anomaly within its oeuvre, and its large audience success in Hong Kong and mainland China is no great surprise. Its subsequent cult success when released in the West likewise makes sense, given the combination of the exotic and the comfortingly familiar it offered consumers of American crime movies. The film, after all, exhibits a transparent awareness of Hollywood cinema. It was made not in a vacuum, but in a global cinematic environment where the influence of American filmmaking is impossible to ignore. What might be considered unusual, and moves us to contemplate essential changes in the way Hong Kong's film industry views itself in the context of international cinema is what resulted from this success. Two sequels to *Infernal Affairs* were greenlighted following the first film's startling success, to be released in swift succession in their country of origin. Like all sequels to hit films, their execution was unavoidably affected by the fact of its predecessor's transcendent success. The climate in which *Infernal Affairs II* and *III* were mounted were significantly different to that in which the first film had been made, and among the unforeseeable factors which had arisen in the interim was the ever-volatile element of having broken the West, and, arguably most pertinently, America. The second movie was made in the knowledge that the audience awaiting it had extended far beyond China. The filmmakers self-evidently did not respond to the pressures and opportunities of this situation by producing a ruthlessly commercial film. Indeed, the sequel that co-directors Wai-keung Lau and Alan Mak produced challenged audiences to an unpredictable degree. It would both reveal a revised agenda for the series and hint at a near-revolutionary approach to communication with a foreign audience.

#### "Chinese people are sentimental:" *Infernal Affairs II* and National Identity

The second movie opens with an audacious echo of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, a central influence on the trilogy and, together with its sequel, pertinent precedent for this sequel. Over black, Inspector Wong begins a reminiscence of his earliest experience as a policeman. The scene which we then fade up on is completely disorienting: the sworn enemies of the first film, Wong and Sam, sit in an interview room, apparently on good terms, discussing

the increasingly dangerous conflict between the police and the triads. "This is not how the world should be," Wong says to Sam, signalling that this segment will eschew the first film's small-scale atmospherics in favour of broader questions. These will extend past the notions of morality and Jungian duality central to *Infernal Affairs* and encompass the structures of the trilogy's opposing "families," the obstacles confronting the Hong Kong police in the years leading up to the handover and, ultimately, the theme of national identity. This last motif will give fullest expression to the impressive ambitiousness of the film and to the shrewd patience Lau and Mak have employed in building to this moment. If the first film was an examination of highly recognisable themes within an unusual milieu, the film which now follows it will have at its heart the question of what it is to be Chinese. As the 1997 handover approaches, Hong Kong's identity is set to change, and the self-definition of its citizens will alter similarly with that knowledge over the course of the story. This trajectory is implied when an elderly police officer, tired of the impediments and compromises of his job, tells a younger colleague that he envies him the opportunities that will await him after the handover. In introducing the notion that a country's perception of itself is irreversibly changed by the passage of time, the film also makes it very clear that its predecessor was a far less conventional crime movie than may first have been apparent. The genre archetypes we met in the first movie, we are now being told, were quite different a decade or so in the past. Their values and priorities have changed, from that time to this, as a result of quite unprecedented changes in their environment. The film builds from the promise of impending change to a comprehensive portrait of just how different life was for these characters prior to '97. Factors such as a wide degree of cultural isolation between Hong Kong and the rest of China and the presence of the "English guys" at the top of the police force food chain create a unique social situation whose abolishment can't help but turn the world upside down. Although these themes will not be allowed to overwhelm the crime story unfolding in the foreground, they will form an inextricable undercurrent to what we are going to see. Then, at the midway point, these complex dichotomies break through to the surface of the action in a pivotal scene contrasting two interviews by the police department. One is an internal enquiry by Chinese officers, the other a meeting of the promotion board which allows us to finally meet the "English guys" and see them interact with their Chinese subordinates. The duality between cop and criminal which gave the first movie its driving motif is replaced by a duality between different types of cop. Thus, the central theme is no longer crime, but race. The genteel, blinkered Caucasian officers on the promotion board – analogous in some ways to the Western viewers and critics who expressed such admiration for *Infernal Affairs* – are dimly aware of issues of cultural sensitivity, but profoundly removed from the intricacies of what's happening on the streets of Hong Kong. While they discuss the niceties of a possible promotion, or the potential repercussions of the handover, their Chinese counterparts work hard to resolve a messy, ugly situation whose outcome will seriously affect the war on the Triads. "We want everyone to know that Hong Kong isn't run by the Ngais," Wong is told by a colleague,

and it is this genuine investment in the power struggle on the streets which distinguishes the Chinese officers from their British overseers, however benign and efficient the latter group may be. The city belongs to the Chinese simply because they're the ones who suffer from Hong Kong being dominated by crime. The scene not only marks the sequel as being more inextricably linked with Chinese culture and history than its predecessor was, but encourages the audience to think of the series' defining subject, crime in Hong Kong, in the context of China's relationship with the West. The audience who sat down for the sequel to a taut, streamlined thriller are being asked to consider questions of imperial subjugation. This thematic agenda becomes most explicit when, for the first time in the trilogy, a Chinese character is called upon to explain an aspect of Chinese culture to a foreigner. Ming summarises his thoughts on how the people might respond to the upcoming change of government by remarking that his countrymen are by nature "sentimental." This sentimentality, this pervasive nostalgia for nebulous aspects of the past, is a key aspect of much contemporary Hong Kong cinema and popular culture and colours much of the film's attitude to Hong Kong social history. Finally, at the end of this cross-cultural encounter, both between a Chinese policeman and his Western superiors and between Chinese filmmakers and their Western audience, Ming concedes that the altered status quo will complicate his job but states nonetheless that "I strongly believe in myself. Sir." That the characters on both sides of the law are more driven and proficient than those conventionally depicted in Western crime movies has been a subtle distinguishing factor for the series since the first film, but in this scene it is articulated, and articulated to a foreigner. That these are people with a different perspective on life, work and ethics to the inhabitants of a Western city, people who have been taught complete dedication to their chosen professions and who strongly believe in themselves, affects the way that this story will unfold and roots the action very firmly in its context. The film-makers are now explicitly defining unique elements of their native culture to a foreign audience, rather than downplaying such elements in favour of the story as the first film did. In taking this approach, the trilogy alters irreversibly the nature of its relationship with non-Chinese viewers. This story of cops and criminals has become a story of national identity, structured in such a way as to offer necessary explication to those with little or no knowledge of China's culture or recent history. This second film, and by extension the trilogy it's a part of, is using a genre form to supply such viewers with important information about its country's current national condition, a bold and unexpected move which makes explicit an entire conversation between text and viewer previously present only as an undercurrent. By the end of the movie, as the night of the handover ceremony sees the characters in forms closer to those they had in the first film, Chinese viewers are merely presented with an enactment of a central moment from their recent history. Viewers from the rest of the world are shown something different: the contextualisation and minute human effects of social changes in a foreign country, characters they have grown fascinated with guiding them through its various consequences. They are invited to understand and engage with the implications of an unprecedented change

in another nation's structure, and it is very likely that a large number of them finished the film with both a greater knowledge of how the process of the handover took place and a more definite sense of that process's impact on the individual within Hong Kong. The film has both changed the trilogy's ultimate shape and challenged itself to offer a window on matters central to the current status of its country, to those less likely to have practical awareness of these. *Infernal Affairs II* marked a significant achievement in realising the potential of world cinema to carve out a place in popular culture for the recognition and understanding of important global questions. If this illustrated a deeper eloquence and resonance in the conversation between Hong Kong cinema and world audiences than might previously have been suspected, it was only one of several films that were doing this in equally intriguing and surprising ways.

#### The Western Response and Contemporaneous Changes in the Perception of Asian Cinema

*Infernal Affairs* received many favourable notices on its release in England and America. Its incorporation of Hollywood motifs had stood it in good stead, as it was felt by some viewers to actually have something to contribute to these traditions rather than being a regurgitation of them. To take motifs from *Heat* might create some interest in your film, but for people to suggest that it's a more disciplined, engaging film than *Heat* puts you on an equal footing to the Hollywood big hitters. The second film was even better received, and, once again, American precedents were of great use to people trying to put the film in to context: a prequel to a panoramic crime drama can have no more auspicious precedent than *The Godfather: Part II*. Those viewers who would have to be persuaded to even watch a film in Cantonese with English subtitles might theoretically find their kneejerk reaction tempered by the awareness of a Hollywood influence in the makeup of the film. To quite how original a use that influence had been put would perhaps not be fully apparent until Sam looked out at the fireworks on the night of the handover: the familiar becomes the foreign through a very slow and patiently executed process. However, the film's attempt to ingratiate itself in this way might not have been as necessary in practice as it would have been a few years previously; by 2003, the foreign was more familiar to a consumer of Hollywood cinema than it had ever been before.

The early 00s quickly gave rise to a cultural climate far more receptive to world cinema than it had been previously: the rise of a number of distributors of foreign language films, together with the increased availability of non-Hollywood productions through DVD and the internet, made international film a less obscure and elite proposition than it had been as recently as the mid 90s. This change in the market coincided with a crop of impressive Asian films which, in different ways, had something to recommend them to one sub-section or another of the Western audience. These ranged from the lyrical, picturesque action movies of Zhang Yimou to the more bizarre and unsettling likes of *Old Boy* and its ilk, films that were grouped in the UK under Tartan DVD's "Asia Extreme" label. The change in the type of movies the East was producing together with the change in the environment they subsequently emerged into

led to a completely new identity for Chinese, Hong Kong and Korean cinema, and one more amenable to an equal cultural interaction with Hollywood cinema. As the films seemed, in numerous ways, more suited to the Western market place than Asian films previously distributed in other countries, so Western cinema began to integrate its ideas and innovations. Although this was nothing new, the manner in which it was done was. Rather than simply taking the most easily translated elements of Asian cinema and strongly colouring them with American pop cultural elements, as had been done in 80s and 90s attempts to break Hong Kong martial arts stars in American films, Hollywood aimed for a certain authenticity by trying to demonstrate a genuine awareness of Eastern film culture and history. When Quentin Tarantino made his homage to martial arts cinema, *Kill Bill*, he didn't so much borrow from Asian cinema as actively incorporate its techniques and many of its key artists, filming whole sequences in Mandarin and Chinese and commissioning a Japanese anime company to animate a central sequence of the film. The apparent intent was not to render a foreign culture more palatable for a domestic audience, but to reach as convincing an approximation of its nuances as possible. In the commercial environment that existed at the time, Tarantino's approach was the only viable one. With subtitled versions of Chinese Wushu movies enjoying significant commercial and critical acclaim in the West, audiences were now more than capable of distinguishing between the genuine article and a careless imitation. Over the first half of the 00s, many viewers had, thanks to the cinema and DVD releases of films such as *Zatoichi*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Spirited Away*, learned the necessity to engage with these movies on their own terms in order to appreciate them as fully as possible. The far increased opportunities to see these films in non-Asian countries and the influence they exerted on Hollywood films led to the effective abolishment of numerous absurd "chopsocky" preconceptions about Hong Kong cinema and an increased understanding of the variety of genres and styles that it offered.

The sequels to *Infernal Affairs* benefited both from this new willingness to accept unfamiliar cinematic styles and from having a recognisable link to the more familiar. Next to the dreamlike artifice of *Hero*, the narrative, mis-en-scene and acting styles of something like *Infernal Affairs II* seemed far more conventional. Familiar genre tropes and comparisons by reviewers to Michael Mann's *Heat* or the *Godfather* movies put the film in a context which served to make the less familiar cultural and political aspects of the film less daunting. Thus the gamut of Chinese films available to foreign audiences extended from the likes of the Wushu movies – aesthetically hugely and beguilingly eccentric but, at their core, abiding to the rules of the traditional action movie – to Lau and Mak's trilogy of films, welcomingly familiar in form yet holding a rich undercurrent of insight into contemporary China.

The critical reception to *Infernal Affairs II* in England and America ranged from the patronisingly respectful to the rapturous. As already noted, it seems fair to assume that a very precise mixture of foreignness and familiarity led to this positive reception, but once the trilogy had found acceptance in the West it became integral to the discussion of international popular

cinema and fluctuations within the crime genre. It was only one of several contemporaneous Chinese films to find audience acceptance abroad, but the type of Chinese cinema it made a place for in foreign estimation was very different to those represented by its contemporaries: it had both contributed a new perspective to traditional cop movie plot points and brought attention to issues intrinsic to its home culture. It not only offered a response to Hollywood, but asked a response to itself in return, and the dichotomy between Hollywood and international cinema had altered so much in a few short years that American cinema's traditional responses to a successful foreign film would no longer be tenable.

#### "I don't want to be a product of my environment:" Conclusion

That a Hollywood studio bought the rights to *Infernal Affairs* as the basis of the film that would eventually become Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* is very much in keeping with Hollywood tradition. The film had too potent a central idea and had been too much of a success to not be put to use in the studio mill. This response to the knowledge of a successful foreign film dates back to the recreation of *Seven Samurai* as *The Magnificent Seven*, and the manner in which the story was translated to a new milieu in William Monahan's screenplay was extremely traditional: analogous American organisations or members of the public were substituted, morally ambiguous behaviour on the part of the star characters was removed, a relationship from the original movie was changed in to a more conventional love story. *The Departed*, perhaps due to the pedigree of its own cast and crew, won a great deal of acclaim in its own right; its Boston setting, along with a boisterous performance from Jack Nicholson, separated it sufficiently from the original film for it to have its own identity. Any criticism of the filmmakers for a perceived cash-in on a comparatively small Chinese film was minimal. That the Chinese film's subsequent fate differs from that of Akira Kurosawa's movie, withdrawn from release in America after the success of *The Magnificent Seven*, is simply a result of the broader and more democratic conditions that now exist for foreign language films, together with the aforementioned growth and alteration in the perception of Chinese cinema. *Infernal Affairs* has not been forgotten or superseded as the result of a Hollywood remake. Its place in history has not been crushed by the power of Hollywood. The power of the internet and DVD meant that word of the original films only spread faster and wider as a result of the remake. People have been able to discover the original film and judge its merits relative to Scorsese's film.

*Infernal Affairs* has been able to hold its own in this cultural battle partly for the reasons listed above, and partly because it is a more aesthetically distinctive film than *The Departed*, creating its own unique milieu where the latter settled for a mis-en-scene reminiscent of seventies American cinema. It therefore invites imitation more readily. Perhaps the biggest illustration of the Chinese film's enduring impact was in *The Dark Knight*; Christopher Nolan's film consciously emulated the epic crime movies of Scorsese and Coppola with its vast American cityscape and interlocking crime movie, but in its second act finds time to homage a different,

but equally evocative and distinctive, crime film milieu. As Peter Bradshaw pointed out in his review, the Chinese city that *The Dark Knight's* corrupt accountant runs to feels and looks not just like Hong Kong, but like the Hong Kong of the *Infernal Affairs* movies. To emphasise this probable homage, that accountant, Lau, shares his name with the director and co-star of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy.

*Infernal Affairs III* closed the trilogy in a different environment to that which had awaited the third movie, and that film's more experimental shape shows how much bolder Lau and Mak had become. Its courageously challenging structure showed a willingness to plough new ground, perhaps because the three films, between them, had done so much of this and been richly rewarded by critics and viewers. Hong Kong cinema has reached an age where its audience is broader than ever before and, due to the variety of genre, mood and theme among its international successes this century, from *Hero* to *Infernal Affairs*, it now has an audience likely to prove receptive to films even more unusual than the trilogy at the heart of this article. Today's smaller world can comprehend international films in world cinema in a way previously unthinkable, and those filmmakers capable of understanding the aforesaid world, with its wider inclusivity of different cultures and perspectives, are capable of making films as remarkable as those of Mak and Lau and, in years to come, contributing to an even more powerful and expressive personality for Hong Kong films.